“Redrawing Boundaries: How India’s Delimitation Reshapes Kashmir’s Political Future”

- *Shahfar*

Delimitation, the process of redrawing electoral boundaries to ensure equitable representation, has been a critical yet evolving feature of India’s democratic framework. Rooted in principles of fairness and proportionality, delimitation aims to balance political power by adjusting constituencies based on population changes. Since India’s independence in 1947, the country has undertaken four major delimitation exercises – in 1952, 1963, 1973, 2002- each guided by delimitation commission Act. However the process has not been without controversy. The freeze on delimitation in 1976, extended until 2026, was implemented to encourage population control measures, but it also led to significant disparities between states. The freeze on delimitation has led to a situation where the southern states, having made notable strides in population control, are now uneasy as the delimitation process threatens to reduce their parliamentary seats due to their lower population growth as compared to northern states.

Kashmir and the Upcoming Delimitation in 2026: Challenges and Implications

As India i.e. Federation of States prepares for the next delimitation exercise in 2026, Jammu and Kashmir faces a unique set of challenges that could significantly impact its political future. The region, which lost its statehood and was bifurcated into two Union Territories in 2019 following the abrogation of Article 370, is now at the center of a contentious debate over representation, electoral integrity, and identity. The upcoming delimitation process will not only determine the distribution of legislative seats but also shape the region’s political landscape for decades to come.

Historically, Jammu and Kashmir had an uneven distribution of legislative seats. Before the abrogation of Article 370, the state assembly had 87 seats, with 46 allocated to the Kashmir Valley, 37 to Jammu, and 4 to Ladakh, However, the Kashmir Valley, with a smaller area but a larger population, held a disproportionate share of seats compared to Jammu. The 2021 delimitation exercise, which increased the total number of seats to 90 (43 for Jammu, 47 for Kashmir, and 9 reserved for Scheduled Tribes), was seen as an attempt to address this imbalance. However, critics argued that the process was politically motivated, favoring Jammu over Kashmir.

One of the most contentious issues in the upcoming delimitation is the inclusion of non-local populations in the electoral rolls. Since the abrogation of Article 370, there have been reports of an influx of outsiders into Kashmir, many of whom have obtained Aadhaar cards and voter IDs. This has raised fears among Kashmiri residents that non-locals could influence election outcomes, particularly if they possess double voter IDs or are registered in multiple constituencies.

The issuance of Aadhaar cards and voter IDs to non-locals has also sparked concerns about the integrity of the electoral process. Reports of fake voting cards and irregularities in the enrollment process have further eroded trust in the system. If these issues are not addressed, the 2026 delimitation could lead to a situation where the demographic and political balance of Kashmir is altered, potentially diluting the influence of local residents.

Boundaries and Political Power

The redrawing of electoral boundaries in 2026 will have far-reaching implications for Kashmir’s political power dynamics. If the delimitation process favors Jammu over Kashmir, it could lead to a shift in political representation, with Jammu-based parties gaining more influence in the assembly. This could exacerbate existing tensions between the two regions and deepen feelings of alienation among Kashmiri residents.

Moreover, the delimitation process will need to address the concerns of marginalized communities, including Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, who have historically been underrepresented in the region. The inclusion of 9 reserved seats for STs in the 2021 delimitation was a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done to ensure equitable representation for all communities.

Will Kashmir Regain Statehood?

The question of statehood remains a key issue in Kashmir's political discourse. Leaders of Ruling party, Opposition have repeatedly called for the restoration of Jammu and Kashmir's statehood, arguing that it is essential for preserving the region's identity and autonomy. While the central government has hinted at the possibility of restoring statehood, it has linked the move to the completion of the delimitation process and the normalization of the political situation in the region. If statehood is restored, it could provide a sense of stability and empowerment to the people of Kashmir. However, the terms of statehood—particularly the extent of legislative and administrative powers—will be crucial in determining whether it addresses the aspirations of Kashmiri residents.

The Way Forward

The upcoming delimitation in 2026 presents both challenges and opportunities for Jammu and Kashmir. To ensure a fair and transparent process, the government must address concerns about the inclusion of non-locals, the integrity of voter rolls, and the criteria for redrawing boundaries. Engaging with local stakeholders, including political parties, civil society groups, and marginalized communities, will be essential in building trust and ensuring that the delimitation process reflects the aspirations of all residents.

At the same time, the restoration of statehood could provide a pathway to reconciliation and political stability. However, this

must be accompanied by efforts to address the underlying issues of alienation and marginalization that have plagued the region for decades. In conclusion, the 2026 delimitation exercise will be a defining moment for Jammu and Kashmir. How the process is conducted—and whether it addresses the concerns of all stakeholders—will determine the region’s political future and its place within the Indian Union.